UNDERSTANDING THE LINK BETWEEN PRE-ARRIVAL EDUCATION AND TRAUMA AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF YAZIDI WOMEN IN CANADA

Pallabi Bhattacharyya, Annette Riziki, Labe Songose, Sally Ogoe, and Lori Wilkinson, University of Manitoba[1]

The ability to communicate in the dominant language of the host society is essential to the short- and long-term integration of all newcomers. Research has shown that experiencing trauma may affect the speed at which a new language is learned by some newcomers. Other research shows that pre-arrival education has an influence on the language learning abilities of newcomers. Unfortunately, there is little research on the two issues and how they may combine to affect language learning among refugees. Our paper addresses the following question: How does pre-arrival education and trauma influence the ability of refugee women to learn a new language? Through narrative interviews with 35 newly arrived Yazidis in Toronto, Calgary, London and Winnipeg, we examine refugee women's experience learning English from their point of view. Our evidence supports the idea that increasing support for timely access to address trauma, more funded time in Stage One language learning, and additional educational supports may accelerate the integration process.

La capacité à communiquer dans la langue dominante de la société d'accueil est essentielle à l'intégration à court et à long terme de tous les nouveaux arrivants. Des études ont montré que le fait de subir un traumatisme peut affecter la vitesse d'apprentissage d'une nouvelle langue par certains nouveaux arrivants. D'autres études montrent que l'enseignement préalable à l'arrivée peut influencer les capacités d'apprentissage de la langue des nouveaux arrivants. Malheureusement, il y a peu de recherches disponibles sur ces deux enjeux et sur la façon dont ces facteurs peuvent interagir pour avoir un impact sur l'apprentissage de la langue chez les réfugiés. Notre article aborde la question suivante : Comment l'enseignement préalable à l'arrivée et les traumatismes influencent-ils la capacité des femmes réfugiées à apprendre une nouvelle langue ? Par le biais d'entrevues détaillées avec 35 femmes yazidis nouvellement arrivées à Toronto, Calgary, Londres et Winnipeg, nous étudions l'expérience des femmes réfugiées qui apprennent l'anglais de leur point de vue. Nos données confirment la thèse selon laquelle un soutien accru en temps opportun visant à traiter les traumatismes, une augmentation du temps consacré au premier stade à l'apprentissage de la langue et un appui pédagogique supplémentaire peuvent accélérer le processus d'intégration.

1 This project was funded in part by Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada-Integration Branch (Prairies and Northern Territories Region). The authors are responsible for the interpretation of the results. Assistance was also provided by multiple organizations in Calgary, Winnipeg, London and Toronto. We are especially thankful for the assistance of Aryan Ghasemiyani from Lethbridge Family Services. Her willingness to put her life on hold to travel across Canada to conduct all the interviews in a space of only 11 days.

INTRODUCTION

Yazidis are different from the previous groups of refugees resettled in Canada due to their unique pre-arrival experiences. Unlike almost all other resettled refugees, the Yazidis had very little time between seeking safety and entering Canada; they were not externally displaced. Instead, they were internally displaced within Iraq and subsequently resettled in Canada within weeks. Nearly all other refugees wait on average 12 years between fleeing their country and being accepted for permanent resettlement (UNHCR, 2014). This group has also experienced multiple and prolonged trauma over generations. The attacks in 2014 in Sinjar marked the 74th recorded genocide against the Yazidi peoples (Marczak, 2018).

In 2002, the Canadian government passed a new *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*. One of the significant changes involved Canada's "selection" of refugees. Prior to that time, the UNHCR criticized Canada for its 'selectivity' in choosing refugees for resettlement who had higher levels of education. This practice is in breach of the spirit of the UN Convention for Refugees which has a principle that the most vulnerable refugees and their families be resettled. Since then, the average level of education among newly arrived refugees to Canada has decreased. In this regard, the Yazidi are no exception. They have significantly lower levels of education and experience functional literacy in their first language, Kurmanji. Over 50% of the Yazidi coming to Canada have never attended school, a figure that is much higher than other refugee groups (IRCC, 2017). The lack of prior educational experience will also have an effect on their ability to learn a new language.

While they are not alone in their experience of trauma, the degree to which the Yazidi arriving in Canada experienced it is extremely high. Trauma and perceived social rejection are common among Yazidi women and girls who survived sexual enslavement and genocide. More than 80% of them have been diagnosed with a mental health problem (Ibrahim et al., 2018; Yuksel et al., 2018), and 65.3% of the Yazidi children and adolescents experience psychological problems (Hosseini et al., 2018). Porter (2018) and Vijanann (2017) have noted that Yazidis are among the most marginalized and tormented ethnic minorities on the planet, which means that this group of refugees may require additional services. Given these unique conditions, we feel this is a good case study from which to understand pre-arrival education and trauma experiences and how they may affect second language learning.

Through narrative interviews with 35 Yazidi participants in Calgary, Toronto, London and Winnipeg, it is evident that this population is different from other recent refugee groups. Almost all of the participants described in great detail the physical, sexual and mental trauma they had personally experienced.[2] Furthermore, the number of adults without formal education or with five years or less of schooling is high. Given these unique pre-arrival characteristics and experiences different from other cohorts of refugees, their language learning experience in Canada likely will differ from others. Sadly, this group is unlikely to remain unique. Examining the world,refugee-producing situations and the growing numbers of refugees needing permanent resettlement, it is very likely that the lessons we learn from the Yazidi can be applied to refugees arriving in Canada in the future.

HOW DOES PRE-ARRIVAL EDUCATION INFLUENCE LANGUAGE LEARNING?

Low levels of education prior to arrival, make it more challenging to learn a new language. The critical period hypothesis proposes that those who fail to acquire a language by their early teens, will have difficulty learning new languages as adults (Vanhove, 2013; Kozar and Yates, 2019). For adult learners without any formal schooling, trying to acquire a second language can be challenging (Kozar and Yates, 2019). On average, refugees with low levels or incomplete education might take more than five years to acquire the English language within Canada (Guo and Maitra, 2017).

Not only is the learning process complicated by this group's unfamiliarity with a classroom setting, but their low level of education makes progression through the language classes much slower. Those who have little or no formal schooling in their mother tongue will have difficulty learning a new language because foundations such as reading, comprehension, writing and speaking in their mother tongue are not fully developed. Evidence from several countries, (Kozar and Yates, 2019; Gordon, 2011; Steel et al., 2017; Honzel et al., 2014) including Canada, show that those who experience depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and who are functionally illiterate at arrival have lower language learning outcomes and take longer to acquire a new language compared to those with higher levels of education.

The link between prior education and the ability to learn English is evident in our interviews with the Yazidi. Two participants with different levels of education shared their experiences of learning English in Canada. Wejdan, a 30-year-old widow with no formal education, told us: "I have never been to school back home [in Iraq]. I was always at home, helping my family. The only experience I have is to run a household. My dream is to change things when I am able to work, I will

2 Our observation is confirmed by our conversations with psychologists and social workers who are currently working with Yazidi refugees. Dr Annalee Coakley (with many others), medical director for Mosaic Refugee Health Clinic in Calgary states in a recent Globe and Mail article, "I have never seen families in acute distress like that" (Frangou, 2018, A11)

work and be something better, maybe work in a restaurant or sew clothes, who knows right now, but I am working hard on learning the language here first." Wejdan's perception of her language learning is much different than Khawala. Khawala, who was aged 24 and possibly widowed.[3] She left formal schooling after six years. She says that "(English) is a little difficult language... I studied in Iraq for six years. I have been attending ESL for three months, and I study hard at home and in class during the night as well... I am confident 100 percent that I would be able to take care of myself outside with the amount of English I know. I feel that with every passing week, I can process more and more information about the language in my classes." The confidence Khawala expresses is much stronger than Wejdan, who has no formal education. It is a pattern we observed across all four study sites and with other participants. The only respondent who completed college and a diploma in teaching prior to his arrival to Canada was Awar, aged 26, who told us that "my English is good, and it's improving" after just a few months.

HOW DOES TRAUMA INFLUENCE LANGUAGE LEARNING?

Mental health struggles such as PTSD, Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), anxiety, and depression can all cause problems with memory. This can increase with age, making language learning more difficult. Emdad et al. (2005) and Johnsen (2008) found that persons diagnosed with PTSD scored significantly lower on memory tests than those without PTSD. Because learning a new language involves memorization of new words and sounds, mastering new pronunciation and sometimes a new alphabet, memory storage and retrieval of new information are greatly hindered by the effects of PTSD. This finding is confirmed by our participants. Zheyan, a 44-year-old married mother, tells us: "Kurmanji is my native tongue. I do have problems with processing English because of all the hardships we went through back home; my memory isn't so good. I have depression and anxiety. I saw my brother die buried under the house they were building. I am not attending school now. The agency notified my husband [that he could start school], but he hasn't been able to go to school because of his poor health". Although she does attend English language classes, the combination of PTSD and no previous schooling has hindered her ability to learn English.

Worrying about the health and well-being of missing family members or those left behind also affects the Yazidis' ability to attend classes and concentrate on schoolwork. Research shows that it is not uncommon for severely traumatized refugees to be unable to attend classes due to their mental health problems and worries about housing, future employment or separation from their family members (Gordon, 2011; Honzel, et al., 2014). Dema, a 29-year-old woman, speaks to this experience: "I have mental problems, and no, I haven't gone to school, I don't even know how to write my name. I haven't taken any classes because of my depressions. I pass out. I am unable to use public transportation".

For others, the struggle to look after sick and struggling family members in Canada also prevents regular class attendance. Bhattal, a married father who had completed high school in Germany, tells us: "I am not able to take any classes. My wife is sick, and I must take care of the children, and I am also responsible for her mother and her three kids. It's tough for me to go to school; my wife has a mental illness and has episodes of blacking out." The struggle to look after multiple family members means less time to attend school and likely impinges on concentration when Bhattal is in class.

Psychologists and other specialists who work with traumatized refugee populations have all observed that the level of trauma experienced by recently arrived refugees in Canada is significantly higher and more prominent than what they have seen among the older refugee population (Health Reference Centre, 2018). Given this situation, it is noted that interaction with others decreases anxiety, depression and PTSD symptoms. Therefore, attending language classes not only helps in integration but also results in better mental health outcomes.

It is well documented that there is an ongoing crisis in finding qualified English as an Additional Language (EAL) and AEAL teachers (Watlington et al., 2010; Ball and Anderson-Butcher, 2014; Hydon et al., 2015). Vacant positions for ESL teachers in Vancouver between 2019 and 2025 are projected to number 6,750, with approximately 70% of ESL teachers to retire in 10 years (Skilled Immigrant Infocentre, 2017). With increasing numbers of allophones arriving in Canada, ESL teachers will need to increase by about 30% in the next 5 to 10 years (Winer, 2007). More funding should be allocated for training new ESL workers as the estimated cost of training ESL workers is approximately $8,000-25,000 per new teacher. With the vicarious trauma among the new arrivals, there is a need for assistance and training for teachers and settlement support workers accommodating the needs of refugees.

Another well-known structural feature of the Canadian resettlement field is the paucity of mental health resources,

3 Part of the interview included us asking details about the family members who accompanied them to Canada. This was not an easy question to ask given that most of the Yazidi families were unintentionally separated—with some having left spouses and children behind who had been captured by Daesh. Other families did not know the status of their missing loved ones, particularly husbands, whom they had not seen in years. Some women would tell us their husband was dead, but others would tell us that they did not know where he was but hoped he was alive. In both instances, with incomplete or no knowledge of their death, we described these women as "possibly widowed".

a problem that also exists for Canadians. As refugees are only eligible to utilize these resources for a limited period (usually ten visits over a year), there is a need for provincial increases in access to mental health support for refugee groups who have higher levels of trauma, such as the Yazidis. More hours with trained professionals should be allocated, especially to refugees experiencing higher degrees of trauma. There is also a need for more training for certified EAL and AEAL professionals. It is not only important to provide additional mental health assistance to newcomer refugees but also to provide training in Kurmanji for those who have low literacy prior to learning English. There is also a dire need to increase the eligibility period for language training to accommodate the needs of refugees with higher levels of trauma, as well as to address the related effects. Providing onsite childcare may also reduce barriers for mothers and increase participation in language learning classes that might result in long-term benefits for the refugees and raise the overall human capital index of the host country.

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